

THE OUTSIDERS

The Prophets

a modern contact. The people had agreed to follow God and live in line with God's desires as expressed in the Law. In exchange, God promised to bless them—with produce, kids, and cows—or to punish them—with famine, war, plague, drought, cattle disease, destruction, exile, and death—as their behavior warranted. (That Deuteronomy 28 takes roughly four times as long to describe the punishments as it does the rewards suggests something about God's level of optimism regarding the outcome of this arrangement.)

The prophets tended to this covenant at the foundation of their nation's life. They were the nation's spiritual IRS, keeping the people accountable for their choices, letting them know how they were doing in keeping with the Law and what God was doing in response. Needless to say, the prophets were rarely the most popular guests on the dinner party circuit.

Many people hear the word *prophecy* today and imagine it involves something like fortune-telling—"The night of the next full moon, a young boy digging in a field will stumble on the Tesseract, a weapon that will change the tide of every future battle." However, the primary job of the biblical prophet was not to read the stars (or cards, or tea leaves, or entrails, or whatever was popular back then) in hopes of gleaning random insider information about what's around the bend of time. Rather, the prophets of Israel and Judah are keenly attuned to the link between choice and consequences. While they do frequently discuss the future, especially the *near* future, their central focus is not on making predictions "from nowhere" but on explaining to their people in concrete terms where their own current actions are leading them.

In the prophets' worldview, the future is not set in stone in a way that can be unambiguously "foretold." Because God is

You might describe the biblical prophet as the ultimate outsider. The prophets operated in the period during and immediately after the monarchies of Israel and Judah. The king, love him or hate him, was your classic politician. He listened to his advisors (sometimes) and kept the institution running. He made decisions about taxes and national security. If he was a good king, he concerned himself with defending ordinary people's interests; if he was a bad king, he spent more time expanding his palace, hobnobbing with elites, and tipping drinks with pretentious names like Blue Electric Pineapple Hiarem.

The prophets, by contrast, operated outside the formal power structure of the institution. Rather than attend to the voices of the national interest groups or bend to the pressure of Big (Olive) Oil, their job was to attend solely to the interests of God.¹ The prophets spoke to the general populace but especially to the nation's leaders, delivering messages from God about current affairs.

The nations of Israel and Judah were in a covenant relationship with God. An ancient covenant worked rather like

fundamentally responsive and relational, alternative futures are always open. A prophet can announce that the people's choices have set them up for a looming disaster. But that disaster might not strike if the people heed the message and change course. The prophets generally lay out the options and their consequences: choose God's way, and your sheep will breed like rabbits; persist in rebellion, and don't be surprised when you end up eating placenta for lunch (see Deuteronomy 28:55-57 for that little gem).

Israel begins its monarchy as one unified nation, but conflicts over leadership quickly splits the nation in two, with Israel situated to the north and Judah to the south. Each nation has its own succession of kings and follows its own spiritual and moral trajectory. Consequently, each nation also has its own set of prophets who arise to address its unique circumstances. Jonah, Amos, and Hosea are prophets of the north, while Obadiah, Joel, Micah, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah are prophets of the Southern Kingdom.

The prophets are especially busy in the later years of both monarchies. This is not surprising, given that prophets serve as a kind of early warning system for imminent disaster. The frequency and severity of prophetic messaging is like a board game timer beeping faster and faster, warning that the window for game-changing action is quickly closing.

One thing to watch for with the prophets is their specific accusations of the ways the people of faith have departed from the good desires of God. A few central concerns occupy a great deal of prophetic real estate. One significant concern revolves around idolatry. Prophetic texts reference prostitution with a frequency that might make you wonder how Israelites even find time to eat between all this sleeping

around. But in many cases, the biblical prophets are drawing on prostitution as a metaphor for how Israel and Judah are cheating on God. The whole country, the prophets claim, has turned into one giant spiritual red-light district. The people are giving themselves, body and soul, not to the God who loves them passionately but to forces with nothing to offer them but a few empty minutes behind a tree.

Another major theme of the prophets is God's concerns about treatment of the poor, widows, orphans, and foreigners. The prophets suggest that a very good status check of Israel's covenantal health would simply be to take the pulse of their overall care for the vulnerable. As people are with their community's neediest members, so they are with God.

In many circles today, the term *prophet* has become synonymous with political advocacy for social justice. Social justice is indeed a matter that evokes a great deal of passion from the biblical prophets. But in interpreting the Bible's prophetic books, it's crucial to recognize that concerns about social justice and idolatry travel together intertwined. The primary job of the prophet was to mediate the covenant between Israel and God. Most prophetic messages were directed not to a "secular" nation but to a religious community explicitly bound by a common commitment to faith. In this sense, the "Israel" the biblical prophets address has much more in common with the church than a modern nation-state. The prophet's message was a call back to the accountable relationship with God from which all true justice springs.

"What the Lord requires from you," Micah memorably declares, is "to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). In the prophetic imagination, proper worship and social ethics are not two

concerns but one. Right relationships between people and loyal devotion to God cannot be separated. The former without the latter is a skeleton without a beating heart. The latter without the former is a bleeding heart without hands or feet. There is no justice without true faith; there is no true faith without justice.

For many readers, one special challenge in encountering the prophets is their use of some especially violent or disturbing metaphors. Hosea, for example, describes Israel as a cheating wife whom God threatens to “strip naked” and “slay with thirst” (Hosea 2:3 NIV). It’s certainly valid to ask questions about how such metaphors might shape those who read them today, and there’s no simple answer for what to do with the unsettling imagery. But as we wrestle with the particularities of biblical rhetoric, there are at least a few considerations worth keeping in mind.

First, in communication, audience matters. The original audience of Hosea likely was almost entirely men, reared in a patriarchal culture, who were utterly certain of the absolute loyalty owed them by their wives but who had no sense at all of any loyalty they themselves owed God. Hosea’s metaphor flips their own paradigm on them, forcing them to stand temporarily in the shoes they’d created for women. The shock of this dislocation is meant to jerk them awake to the shocking nature of their own behavior.

Second, keep in mind that the biblical writers’ own voices are an integral part of the shape of Scripture. The prophets listen for the message God is speaking to the people (such as “God demands your absolute loyalty”). Like all biblical writers, however, they also process and communicate that message using language and metaphors relevant to their experience. For

better or worse, this is how God’s words always move—filled with divine breath, but also wearing human skin.

You might notice that considerably fewer books in the Bible speak to the Northern Kingdom than to their sister kingdom in the south. There’s one simple reason for this: the Northern Kingdom doesn’t last long. The behavior of Israel in the north devolved more quickly than Judah’s in the south, and consequently, Israel’s kingdom is destroyed in 722 BCE by the empire of Assyria. The southern kingdom of Judah holds on for almost 150 more years. If the prophets’ tone during this period gets a bit testy, well, it’s because they’re watching Judah barrel toward the same cliff’s edge that Israel just fell over. People are ignoring every call to slow down and heed their path. In 586 BCE, after remaining determinedly deaf to centuries of prophetic warnings, the Southern Kingdom finally falls as well, conquered by the empire of Babylon.

After the destruction of Judah, some of the prophets, like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, continue to speak to remnants of Judah who are now scattered in exile. In keeping with the contrarian nature of the prophetic job, here the tone shifts considerably. Where before the prophecies were all dire warnings, now that everyone has despaired, the prophetic message turns to hope: God is a God of second (and seventieth) chances. Even if all that’s left of their dreams is a giant urn of ashes, God may yet perform an impossible resurrection (see Ezekiel 37). Prophets like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi continue to work after the exile finally ends and the people return to their shattered land and begin to rebuild. These prophets encourage the people to make sure this God-given sequel doesn’t just turn into a bad remake of the same old movie.

While the covenant the prophets enforce is not binding today, as with the Law itself there is much we can learn from the prophetic books about God's character and desires. The prophets remind us that people tend to become much like whatever they worship—what they honor with their attention, their resources, their love and loyalty. They point out the indissoluble link between care for the vulnerable and relationship with God. They help us recognize God's judgment as an extension of God's mercy. For the prophets, God's judgment is an expression of God's unbreakable commitment to rectify wrongs, put an end to oppression, and deliver us from the addiction to violence, greed, and self-reliance by which we damage our neighbors and do harm to our own souls.

HOW TO SAVE YOUR MARRIAGE

Wisdom Literature

There is a vastly underrated difference between wisdom and knowledge. Knowledge involves comprehending the combustion mechanism by which a car can go from zero to sixty in under ten seconds. Wisdom involves the decision about whether to test this capacity on the street in front of the local cop's house.

Wisdom means understanding the world in such a way that you are able to live well within it. It has an action orientation, and it possesses a sharp eye both for patterns and for the unique exigencies of each particular situation.

The "wisdom literature" of the Bible includes an eclectic set of books that primarily have in common their keen interest in practical questions of life. Perhaps the best-known wisdom book in the Bible is Proverbs, a book packed with pithy advice. Want to know a single sentence that just might save your marriage? Proverbs has got you covered: "Greeting a neighbor with a loud voice early in the morning will be viewed as a curse" (Proverbs 27:14). You're welcome.

Most proverbs are fairly simple to understand. The difficulty tends to arise in practice, when a proverb flatly asserts